



NEWS RELEASE

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Man Sentenced For Killing 5 People at Long Beach Homeless Camp

A gang member was sentenced today for murdering five people at a Long Beach homeless encampment in 2008, the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office announced.

Max Eliseo Rafael, 31, was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole by Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Charlaine Olmedo.

Rafael and 37-year-old David Cruz Ponce were found guilty in September 2017 of five counts of murder and one count of kidnapping. The jury also found true the special circumstance allegations of multiple murders, murder during a kidnapping and murder while the defendants were active participants in a criminal street gang.

Ponce also was found guilty of an additional count of murder and kidnapping and two counts of possession of a firearm by a felon.

Deputy District Attorney Cynthia Barnes of the Major Crimes Division prosecuted the case.

Ponce and Rafael fatally shot Lorenzo Villicana, Katherine Verdun, Hamid Shraifat, Frederick Neumeier and Vanessa Malaepule on Nov. 1, 2008. All five victims lived in a homeless encampment near an off ramp of the 405 Freeway in Long Beach.

The two defendants talked about the murders in jailhouse conversations that were recorded, the prosecutor said.

Ponce also was convicted of the kidnapping and murder of Tony Bledsoe on March 23, 2009. Jurors recommended the death penalty for Ponce in October. He is scheduled to be sentenced on Feb. 15.

Case BA392902 was investigated by the Long Beach Police Department and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

About the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office

Los Angeles County District Attorney Jackie Lacey leads the largest local prosecutorial office in the nation. Her staff of nearly 1,000 attorneys, 300 investigators and 800 support staff members is dedicated to protecting our community through the fair and ethical pursuit of justice and the safeguarding of crime victims' rights.